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ABSTRACT

This policy statement from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities addresses the benefits of public higher education. Along with introductory and concluding sections, the statement addresses access, academic quality, research and public service, accountability, public financial support, and balanced governance. The statement asserts that shifting the historic balance between public support and individual tuition payments will lead to individual elitism and economic divisiveness, while continuing public support will encourage the greater breadth and quality of public higher education, greater accessibility, and continued expansion of research and public service activities. (EV)

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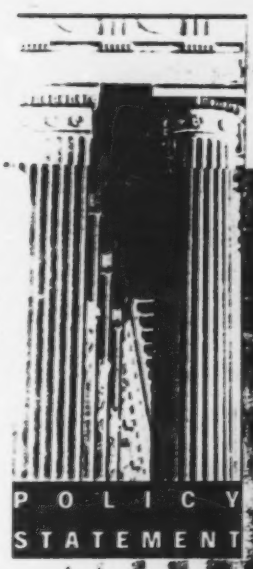
SUPPORTING *the* PUBLIC BENEFITS *of* PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION



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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

AASCU's Policy Statement Supporting
the Public Benefits *of Public Higher Education*

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SUPPORTING

PUBLIC BENEFITS

of

PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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American Association of State Colleges and Universities' Policy Statement Supporting the Public Benefits of Public Higher Education

Committed to the ideals of individual opportunity and intellectual freedom, America's public colleges and universities represent the democratization of opportunity for its citizens. These diverse institutions support the American political process and its competitive economy.

However, this sector of higher education now stands at a policy crossroads. One road points backward to a privatization of public higher education. By shifting the historic balance between public support and individual tuition payments, this route leads to individual elitism and economic divisiveness. The other road continues what have always been our mainstream values: greater breadth and quality of public higher education, greater accessibility, and continued expansion of its research and public service activities. These disparate journeys define two different Americas.

Although sometimes represented as an individual benefit, higher education has functioned most importantly as a social and political force that produces: a more enlightened and public-spirited citizenry; a highly trained and adaptable workforce; the knowledge that sustains our culture and undergirds our economic and technological leadership; and the means for promoting social equity.

Historically, American public higher education has defined itself according to the needs of society: for a small professional class during the post-Revolutionary

period and for more widely educated artisans and agricultural workers in the late 19th century; and for almost universally accessible public higher education in the period since World War II. This system has steadily evolved as a result of the shared beliefs that higher education is important both to the individual and to society and that public higher education is a public good which should be available to and affordable for all who can benefit from it.

For the past 200 years, these beliefs in the value of public higher education have led to a shared investment by state and federal governments and by students and their families. Until the mid-1970s, public higher education expanded—the number and types of colleges increased, as did the number of students, faculty and programs. Physical plants and operating budgets increased, and federal and state support continued to grow. Today, this system of public institutions comprises 1600 colleges and universities that enroll more than 80 percent of America's postsecondary students, conduct basic and applied research and technology transfer, and contribute service to their communities.

In contrast to the earlier wave of growth and investment, the mid-1970s saw social and economic factors that led to a period of slowed growth and disinvestment that accelerated sharply in the late 1980s. By the 1990s institutions were forced to counter the impact of inflation and lost state support with tuition increases, and the balance of financial responsibility shifted toward students to compensate for the lost purchasing power of state appropriations.

Because state higher education appropriations have not kept pace with inflation or institutional enrollment

growth, both the accessibility and quality of public colleges and universities are now under challenge. It is no longer clear how these public institutions can be expected to: sustain current and expected enrollment increases, hire and adequately compensate full-time faculty, fund libraries and keep pace with technology, maintain physical plants, and uphold America's research preeminence.

This erosion of state and federal support of higher education, should it continue, could have dangerous consequences for a nation where the population is projected to increase by 30 percent by 2015 and where higher education has traditionally been regarded as the surest means to social and economic advancement. Recent improvements in states' economies and finances have brought moderate increases in higher education investment. These increases, however, have not been enough to counter the severe disinvestment of earlier years.

The threat to access for many Americans is that as tuition has increased to compensate for less state funding, college costs have taken and continue to take an increasing portion of low- and middle-income families' resources. The following facts illustrate the impact:

- Tuition increases have almost matched shortfalls in state support.

- Tuition increases have risen faster than inflation.

- Tuition, room and board now absorb almost 60 percent of the disposable income of the poorest families and 15 percent of the disposable income of families at the national median levels.

- Federal financial aid now meets little more than one-third of the costs of attendance at a public institution.

- Student debt is rising dramatically.

Fourteen million students now enroll in postsecondary institutions in the United States, with more than 11 million of them in public institutions. Despite this apparent accessibility, participation in America's colleges and universities is threatened. For example:

- Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) enrollment has stagnated for the past 15 years.

- The number of men enrolled full-time decreased between 1975 and 1990 and enrollment growth occurred only among female and older students.

- Black and Hispanic educational attainment, though improving, still lags far behind that of white students.

- The percentage of students working 20 or more hours a week has almost doubled since 1970.

- Only 8 percent of students from the poorest families received college diplomas by age 24 in contrast to 88 percent of those from the richest families.

More than funding will be required for public higher education to operate effectively as a force for social equity and economic prosperity in the 21st century. A comprehensive action agenda should be pursued, emphasizing access, academic quality, research and public service, accountability, public financial support and balanced governance. A broad-based commitment

is needed—from all levels of government, from public colleges and universities, and from the public itself—if the future is to be met with confidence.

To ensure the accessibility, viability and quality of the nation's public colleges and universities, all stakeholders—on campus and off—should collaborate. The following policy recommendations are proposed to meet these goals.

Access

More than four million new students are likely to enroll in college by 2015, with some 80 percent attending public institutions. Under present conditions, it is uncertain whether there will be enough places for these students, whether the majority will be able to afford college, whether all capable students will be admitted given trends for higher admissions standards, whether remedial opportunities will be available to assist them, or whether student and faculty diversity can be sustained without special policies.

Goal Recognizing that a strong statewide system of affordable public higher education creates the workforce and generates the innovations that spur state economic development, available and affordable public colleges and universities should be maintained for all qualified students seeking access to higher education.

Policy Recommendations

State Governments Should:

- provide public colleges and universities with operating support adequate to ensure low tuition and high quality education; and
- monitor the access, retention and graduation rates of low-income and minority students.

The Federal Government Should:

- provide financial aid adequate to ensure that low- and middle-income students can attend college without amassing excessive debt; and
- provide financial aid for part-time as well as full-time students.

Public Colleges and Universities Should:

- recruit actively to ensure a diverse student body;
- work closely with regional school districts to improve student preparation for collegiate-level work;
- make the highest possible retention and graduation rates for all students an institutional priority; and
- ensure that students have accessible alternative baccalaureate options or good community college transfer programs if admissions standards are raised.

The General Public Should:

- engage in long-term family financial planning for college;
- appreciate the importance of public higher education in sustaining a knowledge-based economy that is increasingly dependent on a college-educated workforce; and
- recognize the particular importance of affordable and accessible higher education to the women, minorities, and immigrants who already comprise 85 percent of all new entrants into the labor market.

Academic Quality

Institutional quality is often gauged by the quality of incoming students. Given the high correlation between students' performance and socio-economic status, this means "the richer the students, the better the college." More suitable measures of academic quality, widely used in the private sector, must include the following criteria for institutions:

Mission–clear, consistent, and intellectually rigorous educational goals.

Program–a curriculum that provides students with the skills, general education, and specific learning they need for their future lives and careers.

Faculty–a highly qualified faculty with the commitment and opportunity for intellectual interaction with the students they teach.

Academic Resources and Physical Plant–learning resources, equipment, and a physical plant adequate to sustain the educational program.

Student Support–student services that offer all students a reasonable opportunity to succeed.

Goal The promotion of intellectual and social inquiry and the maintenance of excellence in teaching and learning must be sustained at public colleges and universities.

Policy Recommendations

State Governments Should:

- provide adequate resources to maintain needed programmatic breadth and depth and an appropriate proportion of qualified full-time faculty; and
- ensure adequate support for facilities, equipment, library, technology and student support services.

The Federal Government Should:

- continue to fund special educational initiatives as needed, such as support for libraries, foreign language instruction or developing institutions.

Public Colleges and Universities Should:

- conduct regular and systematic mission reviews;
- base long-term academic planning on the existing strengths of the institution and emerging changes in the academic disciplines;
- use regional and professional accrediting reviews—combined with institutional self-studies—to monitor academic programs rigorously;
- evaluate faculty and staff regularly;
- uphold high standards for libraries, technology and facilities; and
- insist upon high graduation standards.

The General Public Should:

- appreciate the importance of a liberal education as well as career-oriented studies to prepare students for work and citizenship;
- recognize that campus excellence is only partly defined by admissions standards and that the real tests of quality lie in the learning achieved; and
- recognize and support the importance of public tax dollars in sustaining quality.

Research and Public Service

Research and public service activities directed toward the public good have been an integral part of the mission of public colleges and universities since the 1860s. The need for such services continues to grow along with the increased demand for professional expertise. The decreasing proportion of federal support for research, the narrowing academic job market and campuses' reduced operating budgets may limit the institution's ability to meet these responsibilities, reducing America's capacity in basic research, technology transfer and graduate education.

Goal Public colleges and universities should be adequately supported because they serve as valuable resources to their communities. These institutions, by research and scholarship, support statewide and national economic competitiveness through the creation of new knowledge and its strategic transfer.

Policy Recommendations

State Government Should:

- appreciate that the nature and extent of research may vary by institutional type, but that all institutions have a scholarly contribution to make;
- establish clear agreements with individual institutions on the nature, level and funding arrangements for research and service activities; and
- provide adequate support for graduate education.

The Federal Government Should:

- continue funding university-based research, with special attention to basic research; and
- strengthen financial aid provisions for graduate students.

Public Colleges and Universities Should:

- recognize the broad range of faculty scholarship and creative endeavor—basic and applied as well as subject-related or pedagogically oriented; and
- develop agreements with faculty on the criteria, nature and time allocation for faculty scholarship and research.

The General Public Should:

- appreciate the academic and economic importance of campus-based research and scholarship.

Accountability

Today, accountability is an important concern among public higher education's stakeholders. Institutional report cards have become commonplace, as have state efforts to link assessment and resource allocation. Public campuses have responded by: adopting efficiency measures; shrinking faculty, programs and staff; merging administrative functions; engaging in entrepreneurial activity; and generating innumerable special reports while absorbing added costs of new regulatory requirements.

In addition, public institutions have to evaluate and publicize if their mission clearly articulates rigorous educational goals; if the curriculum provides students with the specific learning they need for their future lives and careers; if the faculty have opportunities to interact with their students; if the facilities adequately sustain the programs; and if students are given the support they need to succeed.

Goal The productive and cost-effective use of public funds by colleges and universities should be assured as well as public disclosure of the level of access, student success, and program quality achieved through the expenditure of public monies.

Policy Recommendations

State Governments Should:

- set broad statewide goals for academic quality and institutional management efficiency;
- maintain an adequate information base, but avoid time-consuming duplicative or low-priority information requests from campuses;
- provide some clearly defined, carefully targeted performance funding incentives to encourage innovation and quality; and
- recognize that some performance measures will vary with the mission of the institution.

The Federal Government Should:

- continue the monitoring—collecting, assessing and publishing—of higher education statistics.

Public Colleges and Universities should:

- remember that a public dollar is a public trust and promote campus-wide awareness of the importance of public accountability;
- continue to enhance efforts toward cost-containment and quality control; and
- make institutional financial and performance records publicly available.

The General Public Should:

- use performance data knowledgeably in evaluating colleges and universities.

Public Financial Support

As a public and a private good, public higher education is funded by a combination of public and private dollars, state operating dollars, student tuition and fees, federal financial aid, and research funds. Over the past 20 years, the balance among these elements has shifted: the share of state dollars going to higher education has decreased; student tuition has increased; and the purchasing power of federal student aid dollars has dwindled.

Goal Sufficient state dollars must be available to sustain a quality academic program and tuition must be low enough to ensure equitable and affordable access for all qualified students. Sufficient federal dollars must be allocated to maintain the necessary levels of student financial aid and to adequately fund university-based research.

Policy Recommendations

State Governments Should:

- provide sufficient state dollars to sustain a quality academic program while maintaining tuition low enough to assure equitable and affordable access for all qualified students;
- strive to develop multi-year higher education appropriation plans in accordance with anticipated statewide needs;
- avoid sharp, short-term funding cuts, especially mid-year rescissions of dollars; and
- recognize both the costs and savings of instructional technology.

The Federal Government Should:

- provide indirect support to public colleges and universities through student financial aid, especially in the form of grant aid; and
- provide direct support to public colleges and universities through research dollars and special initiative funding.

Public Colleges and Universities Should:

- practice good management and cost-containment;
- avoid undue program duplication or expansion;
- join in collaborative efforts with other institutions;
- utilize the potential of technology where possible; and
- actively seek alternative revenue through private fundraising and appropriate entrepreneurial activities.

The General Public Should:

- recognize the real costs and benefits of public higher education and
- be willing to allocate adequate tax dollars to support access and quality.

Balanced Governance

Historically, the governance of public colleges and universities involves the faculty, the president, and the trustees, with the president as the fulcrum between the academic expertise of faculty and the political public policy concerns of the trustees. A balance must be preserved and the traditional role of faculty in curriculum development assured. Only in that way can faculty commitment to quality be preserved. At the same time, faculty must adopt an institutional perspective, master the details of fiscal management, and be willing to accept needed change. How well higher education can continue to serve the public good depends upon how well the concept of balanced governance—rather than corporate control—can be preserved.

Goal It must be recognized that the governance of higher education is a tripartite responsibility to be shared by appointed citizen boards of trustees, by the presidents and chancellors they appoint, and by the faculty.

Policy Recommendations

State Governments Should:

- pursue nonpartisan appointment of well-qualified trustees.

The Federal Government Should:

- continue a historic policy of non-intrusion.

Public Colleges and Universities Should:

- acknowledge the importance of both presidential leadership and faculty participation in governance;
- provide a supportive environment for accountable presidential leadership;
- recognize the importance of presidential leadership in creating a consensus around the institution's mission and public policy goals;
- carefully delineate the roles of administration and faculty in matters of educational policy;
- acknowledge faculty primacy in curricular matters; and
- encourage faculty recognition that governance requires knowledge, objectivity, and a willingness to change.

The General Public Should:

- recognize the importance of freedom from political and ideological intrusion to higher education.

Conclusion

On the eve of the 21st century, America needs to make the availability and affordability of higher education more certain than ever. We cannot afford to become two nations—one prosperous and well-educated, the other trapped in economic stagnation and rising despair. Intrinsic talent and motivation, rather than economic status, must continue to be the criteria for college entry.

The nation's economy also demands that we not "ration" a college education only to those who are able to afford it. In an era of rising global competition, our not-so-secret weapon must be a broadly educated and highly trained workforce, capable of adapting to technology and of leading change. With the support of state and federal leaders and the general public, America's public colleges and universities can continue to serve the public good and meet that challenge.

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